

man dismissed them impatiently, and they went, satisfied.

After a hurried luncheon they returned to the theater.

While Carlton's death very naturally threw a pall of regret over the rehearsal, his successor introduced an air of brisk efficiency which did not fail to impress the company. Things progressed smoothly; yet Quaile, alert for the first alarm, waited with a feeling of dread for the big scene.

There was no alteration in Wilkins' manner as he approached it, but after Barbara's denunciation he hesitated. Suddenly he closed his book and walked down.

"This scene is a mouthful, Mr. McHugh," he said. "Of course, I will have to read the part for some days. If you don't mind, I'd rather not rehearse this bit until I'm more familiar with it—until I work out the business."

Quaile didn't stop to weigh the circumstances that had called a halt at this significant place. He experienced a distinct relief that Wilkins preferred not to repeat just now the lines and the action that had preceded Carlton's death and, long ago, Woodford's. Nor did he catch at the moment the uncertain light in the actor's eyes. He was more curious as to McHugh's probable response. He shrank from the possibility of an outburst, an angry command to go ahead. He was unprepared for the manager's indifferent nod, and his voice, pleasant, quite unconcerned:

"Maybe you're right. Skip to 'Mother, now you've had the truth.' Come on, Barbara. You never did like that line; all the more reason for hitting it hard. Jump into it with both feet."

The rest was soon over. In spite of the shadow of the tragedy, the company disbanded in better spirits.

"If you've nothing better to do," McHugh said to Quaile, "you might drop in at the office after dinner. I got to look over some reports. I'm going to give Wilkins a few pointers now."

AS Quaile stepped into the alley, something detached itself from the black wall of the theater and moved forward, startling him. Then he realized it was Barbara, and he was glad, for he guessed she had waited for him.

"I wanted to speak to you," she said. Her voice was almost inaudible. He saw her hand move in a definite appeal. He forced himself to speak.

"I think I know why you waited. Perhaps that's presumptuous of me—"

"No, no," she broke in. "I couldn't go without saying I was sorry. It was kind of you. It was unforgivable of me last evening."

"Why," he asked, "did you resent my speaking to you?"

"I don't know," she answered. "There was no reason. It must have been sheer hysteria. I've never been a victim of that before."

The alley was nearly dark, but they were very close; he knew that she shook as if a sudden wind had entered.

"I wish I hadn't promised Mr. McHugh I'd stay."

He recalled her response that morning, its color of surprise that such a question should have been put to her.

"I've congratulated myself you had the sturdiest temperament in the company," he said.

Her laugh was abrupt, mechanical. "Don't discard your good opinion because of this one lapse. You'll not treasure my bad manners?"

He held out his hand.

"I can't, when you ask me not to."

The slender fingers in his grasp were not steady. They were soon withdrawn.

"And now, if I can find a cab—"

He left the alley with her and summoned one. Thoroughly unsatisfied, he watched her drive away. She had taken the trouble to stop him, to admit her fault, to ask indulgence. She had, nevertheless, explained nothing. Hysteria, he argued, would have welcomed sympathy. Again he was conscious of irritation that an incident so trivial should have progressed in his mind to importance. He

tried to thrust it aside. He walked up-town, curious as to his approaching rendezvous with McHugh.

When, after dinner, Quaile reached the building, he saw that only a single light burned in the upper story. There was no one at the door or in the elevator. He had to feel his way up the long, unlighted staircase. This was an unprecedented freak of McHugh's, to brood alone in his sanctuary. His interest quickened when he paused on the sill and took in the picture framed by the doorway.

The manager lounged in an easy chair. His feet had found comfort among the litter on the desk-top. He beckoned Quaile in.

"I wanted to talk things over with you," he said, with an air of reflection. "I want to get started on this case. I want to know if there's anything in it a man can handle. I need help for that. Now, you've got intelligence. You're a bright boy."

"Thanks," Quaile answered captiously. "Sounds as if you were going to ask me something disagreeable. Tell me first: Do you know anything? Have you found a material basis?"

McHugh thought a minute.

"Let's see what we have," he said. "Our lights have gone out, and we don't know how. We've heard footsteps like Woodford's and his cat's. Dolly swears there is a cat in the place, but nobody's seen it. Then—the big fact—Carlton talks about warnings, and dies the first time he tries the part, just as Woodford died, and he told you if anything happened to him it wouldn't be an accident. Then along comes Wilkins, who never had a nerve before, and shies at rehearsing that same scene. And Dolly talks about a perfume like Woodford always used. That is a strong case for the supernatural; but I don't want to be driven out, and I do want to do right by Carlton's memory."

"I've been thinking, up here all alone. I'm getting along in years, Quaile. I'd hate to believe there wasn't something beyond, so that makes me go slow on the proud and haughty stuff. You remember that line Hamlet has about 'more things in heaven and earth.' But I hate to think those things mean murder and discomfort. So, for the present, we pay no attention to the supernatural side, strong as it is. We look at the facts as facts, and they seem to point to danger for the man who plays Woodford's part. I want you to keep an eye on Wilkins. Hang around with him as much as you can, and try to keep him cheerful. I believe that will help."

Quaile nodded.

McHUGH looked up.

"What's more important, I'm looking for somebody I can trust who has the nerve to hide himself in that theater after rehearsal to-morrow night."

McHugh's intention was plain enough. Quaile shrank from it.

"That's the only sensible course," McHugh went on. "Somebody has to do it. I would myself, although I'd hate to. But that wouldn't be wise, for various reasons. It's simple enough to hide there. It would give the supernatural every chance; but, on the other hand, if there are human devils at work, they'd probably expose themselves when the house was supposedly empty. Get me?"

He took a heavy key of an antique pattern from his pocket.

"That's the stage-door key. It's a volunteer job. I wouldn't ask anybody to do it."

"Let's be honest," Quaile said. "You're asking me. I'm ashamed to hesitate."

"No more said," McHugh snapped, and, before Quaile could interrupt, had raised a situation which, on the face of it, appeared cruel, unnecessary, grotesque.

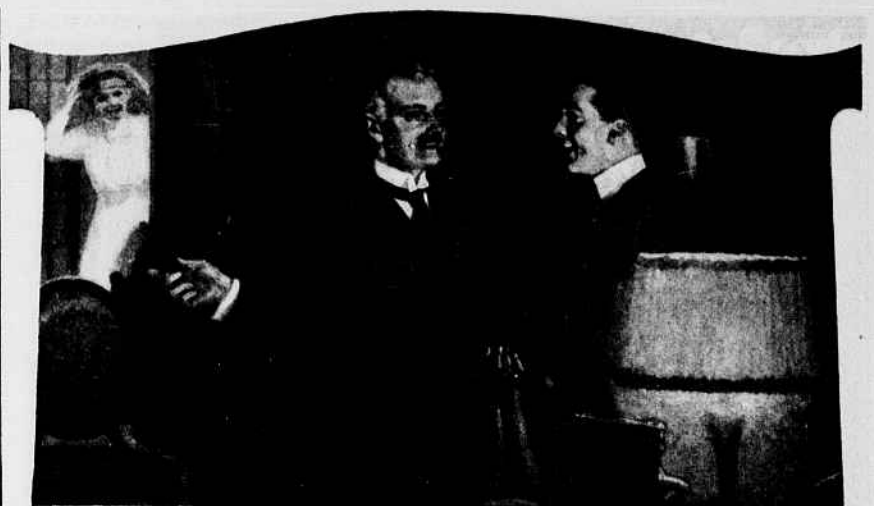
"There's one thing you can do," the manager hurried on. "Keep your eye on Barbara Morgan. Get friendly with her. The girl's worth watching."

Quaile sprang up.

"You're crazy, McHugh. You're off the track. What have you against her?"

The manager's eyes seemed drowsy.

"I get all sorts of queer notions," he



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